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OUR CHRISTIAN NATION:  
White Supremacy and the Making of an American Theology

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July 2017  
Ursinus College  
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OUR CHRISTIAN NATION  
White Supremacy and the Making of an American Theology

ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be a “Christian nation,” a nation which is blessed by God above other nations? This moniker of divinity and chosen-ness has been in some way attached to the American project since its conception, though many in the ensuing years have criticized American life and culture as distinctly un-Christian. Furthermore, what does it mean to be American? To trace citizenship back to the origins of the nation reveals a sense of American-ness which is bound to whiteness. Since our earliest foundations, white supremacy has been in a close symbiotic relationship with our structures of government and American Christianity. This project utilizes the work of theologians Reinhold Niebuhr, James Cone, and Kelly Brown Douglas to explore the connections between the development of whiteness as an American social institution and marker of belongingness and the development of the national identity, an identity which I will argue is at once almost inextricably bound to white supremacy while also deeply tied to a coopted Christianity. Along the way I offer an examination of the theological underpinnings of patriotism and the moral life of a nation, and a brief history of how and why we came to see Jesus so commonly embodied as a white man.

Ultimately, my project seeks to support two entwined theses. I argue that white supremacy as sanctioned and justified by a racialized understanding of Jesus and divinity was essential in nation building and the cultivation of the American identity. But perhaps more significantly, I hold that we must stop thinking about white supremacy as simply a racist ideology, and instead turn to a more nuanced understanding of white supremacy as an essential American theology that elevates the white body to a position which is sacred, chosen, and closer to God.

## INTRODUCTION

To argue that white supremacy in America contains a theological implication, or that white supremacy is indeed itself a theology, is perhaps a very radical or unconventional task. And while this may be true, it is also certainly a task which I feel is of the utmost necessity if Americans as a nation and people are to fully engage with moral life and to make meaningful steps towards greater racial justice and equity. This argument disposes entirely of theories that suppose that white supremacy is limited in scope to economic or social motivations and consequences, and instead turns to the hearts, minds, and bodies of the people who contribute to the continued cultivation of whiteness. We cannot simply think of race as an element of our lives, but must instead see the ways in which race in the American context influences every part of individual and social life.

As a necessity, this argument also strips away a very compartmentalized and wholly westernized view of the role of religion in our lives and treats religion as something which is pervasive in all things and indeed inseparable from the different aspects of our lives. American Protestantism encourages the privatization and compartmentalization of religious life in a way that makes us falsely believe that faith can be separated from all of our other social endeavors.<sup>1</sup> This complicates our attempts to understand the ways in which religion interacts with the social construction of race.

As meaning making creatures, we are driven by a desire to understand ourselves, the other beings we encounter, and the world of mortality and liminality in which we are all situated.

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<sup>1</sup>Armstrong, Karen. *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2015).4-5

When in our attempts to understand the world we butt up against a sense of the divine, we call our new thoughts “theology” and conceive that we are translating the language of the divine for the ear of the mortal, making sense from a great unknowable. There is great power for those who claim to hold the translated word of God, and so the work of theological study must be one not just of teasing out what God means, but also what the implications our conclusions are on other people, particularly those who our theology positions as “other.” For white supremacy, the theological other is the person of color. For black theology, the theological other is perhaps simultaneously understood to be the alienated black self and the white man, who represents more specifically the evil we see in our own faces, the evil which keeps us ignorant to injustice and happy just to see ourselves settled higher up than another on a social ladder.

Protestant Christianity has had a hegemonic hold on shaping the culture of faith in America and so has unduly led us to believe that religion and race are separate entities, but there is always something deeply eschatological in a belief system that positions one group in a state of privilege over another. By placing some groups above or beneath others, we create a system of moral significance in which some have more right to life than others, some are purer or better than others, and some, standing on the backs on those beneath them, will be closer to God than others when their day of judgement arrives. Social hierarchy quickly becomes mythical when embedded with religious justification, and will produce a system that replicates hierarchy ad infinitum. As Americans, Christian or not and white or not, we are living within a tradition that has allowed massive violence to be perpetrated in its name. How are we to reconcile a Christ who can be used so effectively to both viciously hurt and to gloriously heal? This must be one of our essential questions as we attempt to pursue a more wholly Christlike Christianity.

This work in many ways is a two-pronged response to two monumental scholars whose work has made the Gospel real and powerful to me. Firstly, it responds to a demand I heard resounding from James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, and it secondly attempts to address a silence I heard ringing through Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. These two prophetic voices shook the landscape of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian theology and ethics—both were heralded by some for the profundity of their visionary scope while simultaneously incurring major criticism from others, and both left gaps, consciously or not, in the work they left behind. What follows then is my response to Niebuhr's white apathy and Cone's call for an analysis of the theology of whiteness and the white church, which he called the antichrist.<sup>2</sup> It is an attempt to unpack this theology and unravel its tangled ties to American religious nationalism and the myth of American exceptionalism that so permeates the American national identity.

Before continuing I think it's necessary to unpack two of the key assumptions and observations of white supremacy, throughout referred to as "holy whiteness" or simply "whiteness," that I'm working with, both of which were influenced by my readings of Niebuhr. The first is a reconceptualization of whiteness that speaks to its significance as social architecture rather than as individual phenotypical marker. Whiteness operates as hegemonic power apparatus which exists above and throughout American society. It infiltrates all bodies within that society, though it might act upon them in radically different ways depending on the individual body's racial category within the social structure. I am not talking about individual bodies when I refer to the white man or white people. I am instead referring to something that we created, that evolved into something all-pervasive in the American social system, and become so formally incorporated into our modes of being that other social institutions, like Christianity itself, took

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<sup>2</sup> Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 135.



their cues from it or were built upon it. The second assumption addresses the phenotypical marker more specifically. It is now largely agreed upon in the academic world, and has been for some time, that race is an entirely social construction and something that we are born into, rather than a genetic reality that we are born with. The categorical boundaries of whiteness, as we'll later explore in another section, have evolved to *accommodate* different groups of people under the white moniker as suited the needs of a growing nation that relied heavily on a founding myth of exceptionalism and chosenness rooted in whiteness. Cone takes this critique of whiteness as a phenotypical marker even farther and says that "being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are."<sup>3</sup> In that vein, to be white has very little to do with skin color as well. To be white means that one is aligned with the power structure that dispossesses.

Whiteness as social construct and whiteness falsely identified with a phenotypical marker are to me essential understandings, because they leave two further lines of questioning open. Firstly, if whiteness is manufactured, who manufactured it in the first place and continues to, and to what purpose? James Baldwin speaks to this in a 1963 television segment titled "The Negro and the American Promise" when he says that "what white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. The future of the country depends on it. Whether or not it is able to ask that question."<sup>4</sup> Suring up a founding myth of exceptionalism is not enough of an answer to me. I want to know why we, the white people Baldwin speaks to, need that myth

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Baldwin, James. "S16: James Baldwin from "The Negro and the American Promise," first broadcast 1963." *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service, 18 Jan. 2004. Web. 20 July 2017.

in the first place. Secondly, if whiteness is a social condition rather than a biological one, can our whiteness be in some way rejected? How can we attempt to remove ourselves from a power apparatus that we disapprove of, and in doing so, what becomes of our bodies when we reject whiteness? How does the whiteness within us respond; how does the whiteness operating outside us? “We all know that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black man in white skin as quickly as a black man in black skin. It accepts and rewards whites in black skins nearly as well as whites in white skins.”<sup>5</sup> These two questions carry deeply religious overtones when examined theologically: the first becomes a question of why we sin. The second becomes a question of how Americans liberate ourselves from our social sin of racism and seek a sort of social salvation.

Throughout his career, Reinhold Niebuhr lived out what appeared to be an intense devotion to justice, pragmatism, and political activism. Today, Niebuhr’s importance is acknowledged by both liberal and conservative Christian leaders. James Cone, though clearly very influenced by Niebuhr’s contributions to the discipline, has criticized Niebuhr for failing to properly address racial injustice particularly as it pertained to lynching, one of the most horrific manifestations of 20<sup>th</sup> century racism. A recent study by researchers working with the Equal Justice Initiative documented 4,075 lynchings of African Americans in twelve southern states between 1877 and 1950.<sup>6</sup> This number does not include the many instances of race-based acts of terror that occurred outside these southern states or the many acts that might have gone undocumented, but it does reflect the kind of racialized environment in which Niebuhr’s intellectual and theological development occurred. Lynchings became social affairs that drew

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<sup>5</sup> Cone, James. H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969). 151.

<sup>6</sup> "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." *Equal Justice Initiative*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 July 2017. <<https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>>.

white spectators from across county lines. White women and children cut off the ears of lynching victims as souvenirs.<sup>7</sup> This horrific violence was meant to reinforce the racial caste system and instill profound terror in black communities, and it was incredibly common, along with other forms of socially condoned racial aggression, during the time in which Niebuhr was developing and publishing his work.

Niebuhrian theology for me was of enormous significance because of how helpful it was in putting together an understanding of the development of white supremacy as a theologically sanctioned mechanism with eschatological implications. Though Niebuhr spends very little time indeed on the discussion of racial inequality in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he does pay particular attention to other forms of American inequality, and it is a reapplication of some of those key ideas that inform my deconstruction of holy whiteness. It seems that through the years since Paul the Apostle was made a prisoner of Rome and Augustine began formulating just war theory, part of the Christian tradition has become the struggle to reconcile our moral vision of universal love, humility, and justice with the realities of the state and complex community life. Today, racism represents the crux of this struggle, in that American Christianity has defaulted on the biblical tradition of faith over fear in favor of cooptation. Now, the struggle is to reconcile the Christian moral vision with a nation and culture which claims the guise of Christianity in order to ordain an agenda of oppression.

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<sup>7</sup> Blake, John. "America's 'Angriest' Theologian Faces Lynching Tree." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 21 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 July 2017.

## COLLECTIVE SIN AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Niebuhr's work digs in to this struggle. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr offers an intriguing thesis when he says that individual people are capable of the self-transcendence capable of true moral thought and action, but social groups are not because of the natural compounding of egos that occurs when people come together into collectives; thus the individual could behave morally but is made an ineffective and corrupted moral agent by the presence of a collective group that is collectively more inclined to sin than the individual. The concept of sin within the Christian dogma meant, to Niebuhr, the ever-present possibility of evil and the very real challenge that human ego and fear presents to actualizing justice. The concept of original sin helps us to understand the consistent limitations of the human condition and our easy disposition to cruelty against one another, particularly when acting as a majority group. While individuals might martyr or messiah themselves in the name of moral good, human groups never willingly subordinate their interests to the interests of others. Instead, they might find creative ways for the group to sanctify and justify its own behaviors. So it is with white supremacy: white supremacists will never give up the self-worship of white supremacy, regardless of any moral or intellectual arguments made, because whiteness continuously reifies and reasserts itself through those taken up by it.

Reinhold Niebuhr understands humankind as possessing an intense fear of death that provokes insatiability, either for the comfort and distraction either of hedonistic pleasure or imperialistic conquest. The fear of death arises from a self-conscious awareness of the human condition. Self-consciousness

“means the recognition of finiteness within infinity. The mind recognizes the ego as an insignificant point amidst the immensities of the world. In all vital self-consciousness there is a note of protest against this finiteness. It may express itself in religion by the desire to be absorbed in infinitude. On the secular level it expresses itself in man’s effort to universalize himself and give his life significance beyond himself. The root of imperialism is therefore in all self-consciousness.”<sup>8</sup>

And therefore, if we abide in self-consciousness alone, we are doomed to fixate on our own self-interest as a means of reconciling with our mortal finitude. It is the individual capacity for self-transcendence, or a transcendence from our individual bodily realities, that provides the grounds for ethical thought and action. Self-transcendence requires a measure of irrationality, because it does at times demand that self-interest and self-preservation take a back seat to larger concerns. There is a measure of what might look like foolishness involved.

We compound our aggregate vices when we come together as a group, and thus we will never escape the problem of equitable distribution of resources—of land, of food, and I would say of our very own humanness, which has throughout history been a controlled substance as people in power determine who has the right to life and who is considered morally significant. And so human beings will always be more predisposed to immoral action in groups than when acting individually. As soon as two or three come together, it becomes acceptable to sublimate over interests over the interests of the group, even at terrible moral cost. The selfishness of nations, themselves the most absolute of human relations, is proverbial.

Reason will always be the subject of personal or group interest and it will always lie in the hands of the powerful.<sup>9</sup> “The man of power, though human impulse may awaken in him,

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<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).42.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

always remains something of a beast of prey”<sup>10</sup> and in the marriage of these two aspects the men of power will often “create injustice in [their] attempts to create peace” for themselves and those they are bonded to through familial or national ties.<sup>11</sup> “Every group, as every individual, has expansive desires which are rooted in the instinct of survival and soon extend beyond it. The will-to-live becomes the will-to-power.”<sup>12</sup> Intelligent reason or morality will never be enough to do all the work necessary “to grant for others what we claim for ourselves,” and so all the moral and rational arguments put to white supremacists are summarily dismissed.<sup>13</sup> While Niebuhr was focused more on despotic capitalistic industry than on racism (which even still are deeply related), his statement applies: “despotic industry will not give up despotism just because it is told that despotism is anachronistic and counter to American ideology.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, and as we have seen played out again and again, racism will not give up racism just because it is told that racism is counter to American ideology.

When we further analyze the relationship between power and reason, we also must submit ourselves to the painful realization that those whose rationality is affirmed by their power status will not extend that affirmation of reason to unprivileged classes as a means of continuous subordination through a show of oppressive patriarchal care and/or criminalization.<sup>15</sup> Reason can be denied people as a means of using it against them. Withholding the affirmation of another’s reason becomes a power-play meant to reinforce the ultimate goodness or rightness of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 46-47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. xxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 46-47.

oppressor and the ultimate lowness of the oppressed. This was and is done constantly to people of color in a variety of ways since the origination of the American project.

To understand the theological structure of whiteness, we must also dig down into the ways in which patriotism and exceptionalism act in religious ways. In Niebuhr's discussion of patriotism, we are told that "it is not only religion which gives a special dignity and worth to the life of the nation to which it belongs. Patriotism is a form of piety" that "transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism."<sup>16</sup> American exceptionalism, itself born from whiteness as we'll discuss in the next section, put into conjunction with patriotism creates the institution of American religious nationalism that was utilized when building national unity and federal cogency in the days following the American Revolution and then again in the post-Civil War reconstruction era.

This religious nationalism is still invoked in attempts to unite the American mind after situations of massive community trauma, like when President George W. Bush on the evening of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center said that

"a great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining...This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace...None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. Thank you. Good night. And God bless America."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Bush, George W. "Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks." September 2001. The Oval Office, Washington D.C., Presidential Address.

It has also been utilized during elections cycles to unite an electorate, like when then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney said in 2011 in front of a crowd of students at the Citadel that “we [Americans] are exceptional because we are a nation founded on a precious idea that was birthed in the American Revolution, namely, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. It is our belief in the universality of these unalienable rights that leads us to our exceptional role on the world stage, that of a great champion of human dignity and human freedom.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it’s a little difficult to think of a presidential campaign that hasn’t made use of American exceptionalist and religiously nationalistic rhetoric, with the recent exception of Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign, which ran off a very successful inversion of American exceptionalism. “Make America Great Again” claimed simultaneously that American exceptionalism was once real but is now in current catastrophe, and thus America must be in some way saved and restored to its position of greatness lest we fall further and further down on the global food chain. This played excellently to the anxieties of Trump’s key electorates.

Patriotism positions the nation as the supreme soul, the whole which is greater than the sum. The nation would seem then to take the place of God, except that Christian faith in America has become so married to the national identity that God came to be seen as on the side of our nation, and the nation came to be seen as being of God. The patriot is urged to sacrifice himself to the will of the nation and become one with the infinitude of nationalistic glory. It is a deeply religious undertaking that says a lot about how the individual patriot understands their relationship to the nation. “In the imagination of the simple patriot,” Niebuhr says, “the nation is not a society but the society. Though its values are relative they appear from his naïve

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<sup>18</sup> Beinart, Peter. "How Trump Wants to Make America Exceptional Again." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 02 Feb. 2017. Web. 20 July 2017.



perspective to be absolute. The religious instinct for the absolute is no less potent in patriotism than any other religion. The nation is always endowed with a divine aura, which is one reason why religion is so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment.”<sup>19</sup>

Religion and cultural exceptionalism, of any kind, are often employed to provide a level of psychological comfort from deep rooted fears. The national identity, from Niebuhr’s perspective, is a corporate unity which is united more by force and emotions (perhaps most often by fear) than by the rational life of the mind.<sup>20</sup> Fear dominates our collective engagements, rather than rationality or morality, because collective life is a life of compounded ego. It is within this fear and emotion that Americanness and whiteness find their roots. As Niebuhr says, insecurity contains the seed of imperialism. Fear contains the root of exploitation. And besides this, we must also reconcile with this crucial realization: that all reason (rational or moral or both) is the servant of interest. Ration or moral reason, even in the service of public interest, can be good, but it is still nevertheless serving a particular interest. Even perfect democracy, which the United States can hardly claim to practice, is subject to its own hubris. Reason and morality are thus also subject to power dynamics, because those with power, particularly those with religious power, can designate which groups or individuals possess legitimate moral and rational faculties or legitimate interests.

Because of its preponderance of fear, the nation is prone to attacking those that speak against it, critique it, or otherwise go against the ruling social order, as such critique will appear to the emotional mind of the nation to be a threat to national sanctity and unity. “It is... probably

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<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). 96.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 88

inevitable that every society should regard criticism as a proof of a want of loyalty.”<sup>21</sup> And while this tendency to crush criticism is sometimes useful and can promote a common ethos around the values of the nation, it also further places the nation at odds with ethical activity because the nation will become more interested in preserving its idealized image than honestly addressing its shortcomings. We must understand the root of ethical behavior as self-criticism, and the nation, which by nature is unabashedly self-interested, is seldom truly capable of this because there is a measure of self-transcendence that is a prerequisite for self-criticism. We must be able to see a bit beyond ourselves to critique our behavior—in a sense, letting our moral consciousness “leave our body” and take in a broader perspective. Self-transcendence requires a putting-aside of self-interest, which the nation—a collective unity, a oneness made of many individuals, a compounding of egos into one ego— is generally simply incapable of.<sup>22</sup> “For self-criticism of any kind,” Niebuhr reminds us, “is a kind of inner disunity, which the feeble mind of a nation finds difficulty in distinguishing from dangerous forms of inner conflict.”<sup>23</sup>

Even those tendencies toward self-criticism in a nation are usually thwarted by the privileged and/or governing classes. Niebuhr illustrates this in his discussion of the vitriolic anxiety of American political power players in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to the spread of socialist thought, which when placed in the American context contains both intense moral idealism and profound critique. This tendency however is absolutely true of the response of whiteness to anti-racist activity. Over the years whiteness has responded to the moral idealism and status-quo critique of racial equality and equity in a number of ways, not limited to these three: (1) by systematically belittling the moral and intellectual integrity of the person of color

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 88.

and the anti-racist; (2) by criminalizing the black body and enacting socially-justified terror reigns over black society (lynching campaigns of the Jim Crow Era, the terroristic activities of the Ku Klux Klan); and (3) by murdering its movement leaders (as was the case for Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, for Malcom X in 1965, for Medgar Evers in 1963, for Harry and Harriette Moore in 1951, and for Fred Hampton in 1968, each of whom attacked racism from a different lens and with a different arsenal and all of whom were murder regardless of their tactics because of their unflinching rejection of white supremacy and black inferiority).

A nation built on exceptionalism will promote a rhetorical reality of exceptionalism rather than assess the truth of that claim or dig into what that claim is built on or from whence it originated. It will classify as morally bankrupt all that transgress against this claim, because such a transgression reads to the mind of the nation as a sin against the national order. In the United States, where Protestantism has been tied to national power since the 1600s, the sin against the national order becomes a sin against God's chosen nation and people, and thus a sin against God.

## EXCEPTIONALISM AS LITURGY, WHITENESS AS CONFIRMATION

But where did this sense of American exceptionalism come from, and what sustains it? How is it related to whiteness? These too are critical questions that must be examined. A sense of exceptionalism, of extraordinariness, has been at the heart of the American story since the early days of its inception when Europeans arrived on this continent, and when probed we find that it is deeply connected to white supremacy and to Christianity. As one scholar says, Americans have “made a liturgy out of their history” since the very beginning.<sup>24</sup> Whiteness, first as a marker of exceptionalism and then as a marker of citizenship, becomes in a way the confirmation and induction of the white body into the fold of Americanness. Blackness, simply in not being whiteness, becomes the locus of exclusion from citizenship and belongingness.

“We shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us,” said John Winthrop in 1630, when laying out the founding charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop, a Puritan minister who believed he and his fellow Puritans were founding the colony as a sanctuary of reform and a model of Christian community, takes his language from the Salt and Light parable from the Sermon on the Mount as written in Matthew 4:14, when Jesus says to his followers: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

His declaration, made even before the Puritan flagship *Arabella* carrying Winthrop and his fellows had landed on the North American continent and long before the continent had been united under a new national identity, epitomizes the fervent dream of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism is essentially the belief that the United States stands in the forefront of

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<sup>24</sup> Marty, Martin E. *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America*. (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 17.

history as a global leader, chosen by providence or destiny to cultivate the ideal social existence and redeem the morality of humankind. As discussed in the previous section, this claim to exceptionalism and chosenness has been used time and time again in various attempts to unite national opinion around different agendas, and indeed its durability is perhaps grounded in the malleability of an ideology that claims to be permanent part of the American condition:

“Exceptionalism does not necessarily prescribe a single course of action. Indeed, it has proven durable because it can vindicate opposing foreign policies: it justified the United States’ political and military separation from the corrupt Old World before World War II, and has lent legitimacy to U.S. interventions thereafter. But whatever the specific policy, the doctrine of exceptionalism has traditionally led Americans to believe that their country is leading the world, whether through the power of its example or the example of its power.”<sup>25</sup>

To understand the theological implications that whiteness carries, we must understand the implications that whiteness has for American people; we must understand who in fact is American; and we must understand how these Americans came to be so exceptional. This is a complicated story of mythology, nation building and the need for national unity, and markers of citizenship and belongingness to the American project. It is one that cannot be explored fully or with any real thoroughness within the confines of this particular project, but one which bears utmost importance to our understanding of whiteness as a theology. Kelly Brown Douglas, a contemporary theologian trained at Union Theological Seminary (where both Niebuhr and Cone have held faculty positions), offers an essential analysis of whiteness and American exceptionalism in her 2015 book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. She argues that the seeds of this complicated American story, imported from Europe and planted in

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<sup>25</sup> Wertheim, Stephen. "Trump and American Exceptionalism." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., 11 Feb. 2017. Web. 20 July 2017.

the early days of our colonial history “produced a myth of racial superiority that both determined America’s founding and defined its identity. This myth then gave way to America’s grand narrative of exceptionalism.”<sup>26</sup> This narrative is filled with its own sacred language and philosophy, which created a culture that protected and promoted that narrative so as to ensure its continuous reproduction. The narrative begins with the importing of the myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy from Europe by the early colonizers. Especially among the English, but diffuse across much of continental Europe as well, there existed a cultural attitude of Anglo-Saxon supremacy which was rooted first in a belief that Anglo-Saxon culture embodied the best of human political and social life.

This cultural preference has been traced in part back to the ethnographic work *Germania*, published by the Roman author Tacitus in 98 CE. Tacitus presented an account of Germanic tribal society which was based on others’ writings and observations, and which painted that society as exceptional among tribal societies, and indeed even approaching Roman greatness. In her analysis of *Germania*, Douglas offers this synopsis:

“[Tacitus] identifies the tribes as “aboriginal people” “free from all taint of intermarriages.” They are, he says, “a distinct unmixed race, like on but themselves” with “fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames.” Tacitus commended these Germans for their bravery and strong moral character...He went on to say that for these Germans “good moral habits” were more effectual than “good laws.” Perhaps what was most significant at least in garnering the attention of political architects for centuries to come, is that Tacitus portrayed these Germans as possessing a peculiar respect for individual rights and an almost “instinctive love for freedom.””<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). 4.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. 5.

Tacitus went on to describe how this love for freedom was evinced in the governing structures the Germans had in place, which conveyed a high level of public involvement and proto-democracy in which all members were encouraged to participate. Over the years, interpreters would say that “Tacitus was describing the perfect form of government.”<sup>28</sup>

Slowly over time the belief in the perfection of Anglo-Saxon governing and social institutions was transmuted into a belief in the perfection of Anglo-Saxon blood. The belief in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon government became a belief in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon genes. Douglas says that this was perhaps inevitable. This shift “seized upon Tacitus’s characterization of the ancient Germans as “free from taint,” and it suggested that the superiority of their institutions was a result of their blood.”<sup>29</sup>

The English, who believed themselves to be the descendants of Tacitus’s Germanic tribes (a belief shared by other Europeans at the time), brought this belief with them to their American colonies. The Protestant Reformation shook the social order throughout Europe, and further fallings out in England rose questions between different religious factions about the purity of the English nation, the purity of the Anglican faith, and the purity of the English people. Puritanism developed with a focus on cutting out the corrupting religious influences of Catholicism and popular Anglicanism and fostering deeper religious and social purity. The English Puritans eventually fled England. Their critique of Anglicanism, which was taken as a critique of the state, would scarcely be tolerated for long by the national power structure. They made their own exodus out of their own Egypt to found their ideal society in a foreign land, taking with them the comfort of the biblical promise of Canaan and a fierce desire to “build a nation that was in

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 6

keeping with their Anglo-Saxon political heritage, but also to build a religious nation.”<sup>30</sup> And so while there were many other groups coming to the new American continent that weren’t necessarily explicitly religiously motivated, a religious desire to found a pure and perfect society for God’s chosen people has always been part of our American historical liturgy and has become part of the mythology we teach each other.

It is interesting and perhaps helpful to note that the American religious imagination of Jesus developed divine imagery of Jesus along a similar trajectory as the American socio-political structure developed qualifications for citizenship. Jesus as white developed out of necessity alongside the evolution of whiteness as a social institution. He has a long and complex history as well that was (and continues to be) influenced by the emerging social and political challenges of American nation building. From the very beginning, Americans have “remade the Son of God visually time and again into a sacred symbol of their greatest aspirations, deepest terrors, lowest actions, highest expressions, and mightiest strivings of racial power and justice... [Jesus] changed appearances subtly with shifting perceptions of who was considered genuinely white.”<sup>31</sup>

With Jesus as a white man, and whiteness as we shall soon see an expanded version of Anglo-Saxonness, and Anglo-Saxon values understood both as being proto-American and as being fully-realized by American society, “Americans” should be understood to mean the white inheritors of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, or anyone who is taken in by and aligns with the myth of white supremacy. People of color, by this mythology and by various citizenship practices, have always been in some way excluded from full Americanness. A white Jesus who is working for

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<sup>30</sup> Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 7.



the success of the American project allows white Americans to feel as though white supremacy stretches back thousands of years and stretches forward through sacred space to heaven, where it sits at the right hand of God. Holy whiteness is used to sanctify racial hierarchy, American exceptionalism, and Manifest Destiny, which sits at the root of US imperialistic agendas. It builds a narrative that positions white people as God's Israelites, chosen people in a chosen land destined to bring about a new world order predicated upon their greatness. "Religion created and reinforced racial hierarchies. By spiritualizing social concerns like slavery, land expropriation, tribal removals, segregation or interracial marriage, Americans imbued racial issues with cosmic significance." White theology reached its culmination when it succeed in placing whites in a position of chosenness and superiority, and then adjusted its mythology even in the face of losses like the Civil War. Whiteness assumed that white domination over people of color was a god-given moral right, given either for the promotion of white society as divinely ordained rulers and/or the patriarchal "protection" and stewardship of people of color by white people.

Referring back to Niebuhr, we must remember that people with power get to determine who has legitimate moral and rational faculties, and that rational and moral arguments are always the subject of an interest. In the case of the theology of white supremacy, if white interests lie in the eschatological fallacy that positions the white body in a superhuman/divine state, white bodies will manipulate reason and morality to uphold and reify that eschatology. It will create mythic history to justify its current present situation and its future goals. Whiteness will find ways to fashion the divine in its likeness, and so we have the blond haired and blue eyed image of Christ that even today holds such a spot of prominence in American religious imagination.

## THE FOUNDING MYTHOLOGY OF WHITE THEOLOGY

As previously mentioned, Americans have long made a liturgy of our history. We have also made sacred imagery. We have mythologized ourselves, and this has been essential to the structural maintenance and promulgation of whiteness as a theological institution.

When the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts, they bore with them no imagery of Jesus. As iconoclastic reformers attempting to purify themselves of Catholic influence, they considered attempts to depict the divine as deeply sacrilegious. Instead, they imagined Jesus as light. There are various descriptions of Jesus as being surrounded by a brilliant and blinding light which obscured his features.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, for a long time, the image of a white Jesus was far from the American imagination, arguably because there was no greater American identity yet established. Jesus was visualized as light by the Puritans or Quakers.<sup>33</sup>

Native American converts, many of whom understand the white settlers as bringers of profound terror and trauma, identified with the “redness” of Jesus—his blood and wounds and suffering, which resonated deeply with their own struggle. “Bloodied and beaten, the crucified Christ became for many Native Americans a symbol of their experience. If the sacred bled, then their bleeding would be meaningful as well.”<sup>34</sup> Moravians and other clusters of colonists struggling to eke out a new life for themselves in a new land also developed religious imagery that fixated on wounds and suffering, perhaps also to make their struggle against the wilderness meaningful.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 61.

People came to the colonies for a wide variety of reasons. The promise of economic possibility, forced migration through enslavement, prison sentencing, and indentured servitude brought people over to the colonies over the ensuing century. Ethnic representation and difference increased. Whiteness as a racial category, however, had not yet developed— Anglo-Saxon supremacy still held a hegemonic position of racial dominance. Among European colonists, the narrative of chosenness expanded and developed and became codified. The English saw themselves as a chosen-people in a land chosen for them by God and destined for greatness. It is reasonable to imagine perhaps that reliance on this myth was a coping mechanism for the struggle of the settler life, but reliance on the myth also demanded a close-keeping of ethnic boundaries and a pitting of the dominant hegemonic Anglo-Saxon “race” and those other groups wishing to remain in good standing against incoming minority groups. It is important to note that because the English settlers of power and means were fiercely Protestant (though of various denominations) Anglo-Saxon supremacy was also tied to hegemonic presence of Protestantism and its position of superiority.

As a new nation following the end of the American Revolution, the United States had to figure out “who was a citizen, who could become a citizen, and what that status conferred.”<sup>36</sup> Markers of citizenship came to heavily revolve around race, and thus those who could be considered fully American and fully worthy of socio-political protection and privilege was codified around racial parameters. In many ways, the parameters of citizenship and census signaled for white society how human they were to regard nonwhites. “For the purposes of compromise, the Constitution counted enslaved individuals as three-fifths of a person. No one

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 79.

knew for sure if that elevated or lessened the status of slaves” but either way, it made it clear that enslaved people, the overwhelming majority of whom were people of color, were not fully human. This translated to a widespread racist viewing of all people of color, free or not, as not fully human. Almost twenty years later, the Naturalization Act of 1790 “declared that any “white” individual who resided in the country for two years could apply for and become a citizen. Compared to European nations of the time, this was not only an easy route to citizenship but also an expansive view of whiteness” that could be appealed to and expanded to include many different types of Europeans, even Catholics and Jews.<sup>37</sup> This dichotomy between the blanket disenfranchisement of people of color and the relative ease that whiteness provided to those attempting to secure citizenship both set up and played upon white American society’s belief in the universal humanness of the white body and the universal non-humanness or subhumanness of the black body.

Anglo-Saxonness was in a way “expanded” to gradually allow other groups into the rank of recognized American citizenry. At first, Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy rejected outright the legitimacy of non-Anglo-Saxon claims to Americanness. “A wave of Catholic immigrants—many of whom were poverty-stricken from Ireland—came after 1830 and further muddled the waters of citizenship and identity. Some “native whites” [quotations mine] likened Irish Catholics to blacks and deemed them to be a racial group outside the parameters of whiteness.”<sup>38</sup> Gradually, European immigrant groups found greater acceptance as they appealed to hegemony on the grounds of that their phenotypical whiteness could and did make them white in the same

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 79.

sense that Anglo-Saxon Englishmen were.<sup>39</sup> People of color could not make a similar appeal and thus the parameters of whiteness would not be expanded to include them. Claiming whiteness and successfully embodying its embedded Anglo-Saxon values became something that immigrants had to do in order to assimilate into the power structure. Non-English European colonists had to in a sense “pass” for Englishmen and people of color were systematically locked into a permanent state of rightlessness and alien-ness, either as slaves to white masters or as freed by non-enfranchised men and women without any real rights to speak of.<sup>40</sup> The parameters of whiteness would continue to evolve through the 1800s and 1900s with each wave of immigrants, each round of immigration legal reform, and is even today still evolving, such that we now talk about “white-passing” people of color.

Leading up to and after the Revolutionary War and all throughout the early federalist era, regional ideological differences developed between the north and south. Put incredibly simply, the north developed a fierce evangelical religious nationalism steeped in its Puritan heritage, and the south developed a sort of civil religion based in rational Deism. Though in many ways incredibly similar belief structures, these competing regional ideologies, coupled with regional economic and politic competition, created a lot of tension. Their main point of contention boiled down to who would get to shape the moral and legal architecture of the country in the image of their ideology. In some senses, they both won out in the long run. Both had profound influence over the country and did much of the early work of “liturgizing” American history and values. According to Douglas, “while the canopies of [southern] civil religion and [northern] Protestant evangelism were different in terms of their secularism, they both functioned in the same way.

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<sup>39</sup> Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). 38.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 30-32.

They legitimated America's Anglo-Saxon mission; at the same time they gave sacred validity to the Anglo-Saxon myth. They connected both to God... A myth that declares the "supra-status" of a group of people compels a sense of destiny that is bound to turn deadly" for those not in the supra-human class.<sup>41</sup>

Regional tensions between northeast and southeast became even more complicated in the years following the American Revolution, when the end of British rule heralded the opening of the western frontier and settlers began to flood the west in earnest. Frontier territories became a source of contention for the North and South, both of whom wanted control over shaping the national government and both of whom worried about what the legality or illegality of slavery in the new western states would mean for the balance of regional economic and political power.

The work of bringing frontiersmen into the project of nation building became a major priority for eastern Protestants. In addition to anxiety over the fate of slavery, the young country was in many ways geographically amorphous and unsteady. There were two wide-scale and interrelated concerns: first, that frontier communities would align with the Spanish or French still in the area, and the country would lose those citizens and that territory to their competitors on the continent; and second, that frontier faith, nurtured by new denominations like Methodism or Mormonism that arose to serve the particular theological needs of settlers, would be incompatible with the Christianity of the east coast and would not be able to utilize a sense of shared faith to encourage widespread participation in nation building efforts.

This is when the image of Jesus as white began to really take off and sink deep roots into the American cultural psyche. Jesus as white had already developed some favor in the popular imagination. A letter attributed to a most likely fictitious Roman author by the name of Publius

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 14.

Lentulus, who was allegedly writing to a Roman official with a first-hand account of the appearance of Jesus, was circulating in the American academy, seminary, and broader community consciousness and gaining esteem and popularity. This account gave a testimony of Jesus, though a Jew, as a man of complexion and values distinctly in line with the mythology of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. In the letter, Jesus is described as

“a man of medium size;... he has a venerable aspect, and his beholders can both fear and love him. His hair is of the color of the ripe hazel nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled, with a blueish and bright reflection flowing over his shoulders... His brow is smooth and very cheerful, with a face without a wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly ruddy complexion. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is abundant, of the color of his hair, not long, but divided at the chin. His aspect is simple and mature, his eyes are changeable and bright. He is terrible in his reprimands, sweet and amiable in his admonitions, cheerful without loss of gravity. He was never known to laugh, but often to weep. His stature is straight, he hands and arms beautiful to behold. His conversation is grave, infrequent, and modest. He is the most beautiful among the children of men.”<sup>42</sup>

Although the letter had been well known in Europe even prior to American colonization, it had been widely and flatly regarded as fraudulent. Even as it gained popularity again in the United States, people had a general sense that it was fake. There was also, however, a deep and powerful yearning for it to be true. An English traveler and author by the name of E.D. Clarke “trekked through the Middle East and found in Nazareth numerous paintings of Christ. Of one painting, he claimed that it “seems to have borrowed his notions for the picture from the spurious *Letter of Publius Lentulus*... which is so interesting, that, while we believe it to be false, we perhaps wish that it were true.”<sup>43</sup> With the advent of new production, transportation, and

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<sup>42</sup>Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 82-83.

communication technologies and the anxiety surrounding the fate of the western frontier, mission societies began popping up in the east, particularly in the north, to bring a more cogent sense of patriotism and Christianity to the west. They bore with them this fraudulent image of Jesus, broadly disseminating it across the country and planting it deep within the American religious imagination.

Of these many missionary societies, the work of the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society are particularly notable. The American Bible Society (ABS) was founded as a non-denominational, nonprofit organization in 1816 in New York City. Its goals to this day were to distribute and translates the Bible and to provide aids and tools for biblical study to as many people as possible, namely those in regions without a strong Christian presence. The American Tract Society was founded about a decade later in 1825, also as a nonprofit, nondenominational but distinctly evangelical organization with the express mission of publishing and disseminating Christian literature across the entirety of the young nation. These “tracts” were generally small pamphlets containing information on a wide variety of topics, from recipes and to children’s bible study aids to narrative tales meant to help Christians explore the guidelines of Christian moral life. They were often replete with interpretive guides to the Bible, many hundreds of which were of course still being broadly distributed by the ABS. Over a ten year span alone, the ATS sold 2.4 million books. Over the course of a century, they would distribute over 800 million tracts. In that same period, their teams of missionary agents would visit over 25 million families across the far reaches of the continent, uniting the country in a network of biblical literature that put patriotism and Christianity at the forefront of community building efforts.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 80.



Many of these pamphlets contained images of a white Jesus that closely matched the Publius Lentulus description, and many of them contained information meant to aid in a theological understanding of slavery. Much of this narrative focused on the importance of patriotism and national unity, the virtues of the American people, and God's blessing over the American project. They also often presented slavery as a positive good, a symbiotic institution which protected the interests of both slave and master. A lot of focus was paid to how forced migration brought Africans out of their heathen and allegedly Christ-less continent and into a civilized, Christian setting where they could come to a knowledge of their savior, repent their sins, and find salvation.<sup>45</sup>

The mass-production and mass-distribution of religious literature from the north to the western frontier spread images of white Jesus and carried a key message: participating in the work of nation-building and the American project was a deeply spiritualized Christian undertaking. Patriotism now became overtly and expressly aligned with Christianity, and the work of the ATA, ABA, and other evangelical mission societies were arguably essential in uniting disparate regions. This push for unity in thought and mission fits readily into Niebuhr's assessment of the moral conscience of a nation.

Jesus began to be represented with white features as whiteness developed as a demographic category to accommodate the waves of various non-English European ethnic groups, and this image was popularized and widely disseminated as part of an attempt to ideologically unite the disparate frontier communities with the original colonies. White Jesus found his origins as whiteness developed and a greater need for widely recognizable markers of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 80-84.

belongingness emerged. The American Tract Society, American Bible Association, and other Christian mission societies founded in the northeast began the work of mass-producing images and stories of Jesus for missionaries to carry out from the northeast to the west. Mission work carried out by East coast Christians in frontier territories was in many ways a program dedicated to colonizing one's own fellow countrymen—uniting everyone under a banner of Christianity that promotes the ethic of nation building and national unity. This work was arguably more successful in uniting the nation than any attempts at bringing people together under a secular banner of nation building. It made significant use of new transportation and mass-production technology.

By the time the Civil War began, citizenship and humanness were firmly attached to whiteness. Efforts were being made by enslaved and free black people and some abolitionists to undermine this connection and to reconcile Jesus to their own desire for freedom, agency, and liberation, but even so these activities were still relegated to the fringes of society. The beginnings of the black theology that would both nurture and develop James Cone got its footing. Black people began associating Jesus and the Christian message with their struggle, seeing him as one of the oppressed who subtly subverts and resists his oppressor. During the Civil War, the Confederacy and the Union both claimed to carry Jesus onto the battlefield with them. Both used Christian nationalistic and religious language to justify their causes. The Union in many senses won the battle over who got to interpret what the message of Jesus meant for racial relations in the United States. Not willing to give up their claim to Jesus or their deeply embedded ties to a racially stratified society, the Confederacy, whose supporters were not just limited to the south, was forced to retool their theological thinking so that they might maintain their notions of white supremacy and chosenness even in the face of their great loss. With

marvelous success, and truly indicating the ways in which a religious narrative can be manipulated to suit a cultural contextual need, the Confederacy used the war and the massive traumas and indignities it inflicted upon them to reclaim Jesus from the north and from people of color.

“With a war they considered one of “Yankee aggression,” Confederates looked to Christ as a warrior who experienced mortal pain. They grabbed the Jesus of the slave imagination, grafted it onto their national agenda, and created a new hybrid. Jesus would be in the south, but not a slave. He would be there as a Confederate captain.”<sup>46</sup>

After the war, former slaveholders fashioned themselves as the oppressed group that suffered at the hand of empirical tyranny (the Union).

“What ultimately occurred was a great reversal and resurrection. By the end of the century, the American Christ who had come to identify with slaves was transformed into a messiah of former slaveholders whose disciples wore white robes, burned crosses, and terrorized people of color.”<sup>47</sup>

In the years following the war, the great hope of the Reconstruction Era was met instead with new covert forms of slavery—from penal slavery, to Jim Crow, to the War on Drugs and mass incarceration. The white body is still the privileged citizen. Obviously the saga of race in American continued to take many evolutionary turns in the decades since the Civil War, but it is this post-war moment that I find to be truly evocative of the ways that white supremacy manipulates history and Christianity, being that this moment was so monumental in its massive trauma for the nation, its apparent victory for slaves and abolitionists, and its decoupling of whiteness from citizenship and forced whiteness to re-strategize. The Reconstruction Era required that whiteness to take on more covert forms of white advocacy and black oppression.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 122.

These strategies today are even still evolving and still demand intensive analysis through an application of white-theology theory. There is simply not enough room to do that work here with any decent thoroughness.

On paper, the end of the Civil War and the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation had decoupled whiteness from citizenship and opened citizenship up to non-white individuals, but the American national identity was deeply shaken by the monumental self-criticism that the war embodied. The country had experienced a massive communal trauma and a forced shift away from what had been a cherished, traditional, profitable, and biblically rooted way of life for southern slaveholders. It was also a shift away from the hegemonic hold of Anglo-Saxon supremacy and towards an expansion of whiteness and citizenship that still maintained the normative privileged power dynamic. The national unity, as Niebuhr promises it would, found tactics to subvert the “self-criticism” of civil war and abolition that in many ways simply returned it to its previous state of racial hierarchy and white power.

## SOCIAL LIBERATION VERSUS PERSONAL PURITY

Despite putting forth so much of the framework from which we can understand the very mechanization of white supremacy and undoubtedly encountering various aspects and effects of the aforementioned history, it remains unclear why Niebuhr did not make race a bigger component of his writing and ministry. This for me is perhaps of even more profound significance than the framework itself. Cone's biggest critique of Niebuhr lies in that though Niebuhr knew of cruelties of racism, preached on racism, and aligned himself with the Civil Rights Movement, he did not actually take real *risks* for the sake of anti-racism. He remained cozy with liberal Protestantism even as he called it out for the short-sightedness of the Social Gospel and its sanctioning of corrupt or amoral US domestic and foreign policy. Cone levies a criticism that amounts to demanding why Niebuhr talked the talk but could not walk the walk.

That a man so wholly devoted to making loud and clear the very real reality of our individual and communal predisposal to sin should himself be blind or silent to racism, one of our most nefarious social evils, astounds me. It speaks to our very human tendency to place our own egos and senses of security above our ethical convictions. And it reminds me above all of the power that sin has to make us blind or complacent to its existence. According to Cone, Niebuhr never specifically said anything about lynching and failed more broadly to include any sort of comprehensive discussion of segregation and white supremacy in his work.

Because of Niebuhr's nation-wide acclaim and significance, Cone has stated that Niebuhr's apparent indifference and apathy towards lynching and racism in America encouraged other white theologians to ignore the issue as well.<sup>48</sup> That Niebuhr could fail to seriously address

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<sup>48</sup> Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2011).

the horror and injustice of racism and its theological implications speaks to what at best seems to be a willful ignorance and at worst a morally bankrupt indifference, both of which still saturate white Protestantism today.

What we must acknowledge is that white supremacy contains within it its own theological groundings, its own hermeneutic, its own deeply-theological conclusions about the way the universe operates and human beings' place in such an arrangement, because white supremacy levels claims about the human-ness of human beings and thus imposes an eschatological structure that places white people closer to God and thus closer to heaven. Failing to understand the deep-rootedness of whiteness within our individual and national conceptions of selfhood and soul has led to an incompetent and incomplete conversation which is incapable of bringing about true transformation.

James Cone's work follows on the heels of Niebuhr and makes plain the theological failure of Niebuhr's omission. The hermeneutic for James Cone's theology is rooted in the historical lived experiences of African Americans. It aggressively avoids any white-washing universalism by explicitly addressing the theological realities and implications of American racism and white supremacy. It is motivated by the theological questions he encountered in his own life and in the tension he saw between the Black Power movement and in the Civil Rights movement.

Like Niebuhr, Cone was something of a theological pragmatist, but he positioned his work squarely against the indifference of white Protestantism, which for too long had ignored the evil of racism in America with the effect of promoting and protecting it. Niebuhr criticized liberal white Protestantism as being too optimistic in their faith that they could build the kingdom of God on earth through their pursuit of perfect social justice. Unlike Social Gospel

adherents, Niebuhr was certain that the kingdom of God could never be realized on earth and that heaven must be understood as a sphere entirely separate from earthly existence. Human beings could hope to achieve enough justice by striving to emulate the example of perfect justice that was surely present in the kingdom of God, but Niebuhr insisted upon this separation because he believed the predisposition of humans towards sin would render them always incapable of perfect justice. This is striking because Niebuhr in turn was criticized himself for failing to actualize his moral and ethical beliefs surrounding racial justice, namely because he himself was guilty of the sin of being too cozy with his prestige within white Protestantism to ever actually offer a radical critique it. Cone does not permit this hypocrisy: that white Christians could claim to work towards a social good while ignoring racism, and that they could not agree with him that we are in fact always engaged in the struggle of the heavenly kingdom on earth, was a profound failure and evidence of the power of whiteness to corrupt and coopt Christianity.

To Cone, the theologians he had studied in graduate school had little real power or promise to offer to African American students who were, among other things, struggling to understand what white supremacy meant for theodicy. “What could Karl Barth possibly mean,” wrote Cone, “for black students who had come from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, seeking to change the structure of their lives in a society that had defined black as non-being?”<sup>49</sup> Cone saw a deep disconnect between the theological imperatives of Christianity and the lived-Christianity of white Protestant Americans, which was so frequently called upon to justify racial oppression or to provide the grounds for ignoring it. In response, he further developed black theology and made clear the biblical imperative of liberation from oppression:

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<sup>49</sup> Cone, James. H. *God of the Oppressed*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 3.

“By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering....Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity.”<sup>50</sup>

God is consistent in God’s choice to be with the oppressed and the work of liberation is the way that we recognize God’s presence in the world. God reveals Godself as the God of those that are oppressed by empirical powers again and again throughout the biblical record. Tales of the Israelites struggling against the empirical powers of Egypt or Babylon make up the bulk of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we are given a case study of one man’s life spent undermining the oppressive empirical power of Rome and organizing the resistance movement.

But what of the god of the Oppressor? The god who is everyday across the American continent represented by the white body of Jesus Christ? The god that Cone has called out as the antichrist and that Niebuhr allowed to exist with his silence? White supremacists have called upon a version of Christ which is consistent with our holy American historical liturgy but in no way consistent with the Biblical text, and which again and again has been used to justify horrific violence and indignity perpetrated upon nonwhite bodies. White supremacy coops Christianity and constructs it into a system of justification and subjugation. Cone refers to it as false Christianity and an antichrist.<sup>51</sup> “The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that [white] Christians wear around their necks. Rather than reminding us of “the cost of discipleship,” it has become a form of “cheap grace,” an easy way to salvation that doesn’t force us to confront the power of Christ’s message and mission.”<sup>52</sup> This cross no longer carries its revolutionary significance. The false Christianity of white America does not turn systems of

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<sup>50</sup> Cone, James H. *Black Theology of Liberation*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 63-64.

<sup>51</sup> Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 135.

<sup>52</sup> Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011) xiv.



empire and oppression on their head, as the cross insists, because it has become one with those systems. Though it might be a false theology, it is still operating as theology nonetheless, and wrapping our heads around the basics of this theology are imperative to understanding how it works and how we might begin to dismantle it.

This false American Christianity focuses on personal purity, egoistic spirituality, and empire building rather than on “kingdom building,” or the cultivation of social equity and justice. The imperative of personal purity is a failure of interpretation, a bastardization of the promise of God, and the imperative to grow the American empire is entirely count. It makes salvation easy, because all it requires is a kind of passive *abstinence* from aspects of life deemed unclean by a ruling power, rather than an active *involvement* in aspects of life deemed unjust by our own conscience. There is no risk for the abstainer involved. They are not going against the grain of the empirical structure, and in actuality are providing greater ease for the empirical structure as it attempts to claim greater territory because opting in to a system of purity automatically opts us in to a system of hierarchy.

The significance of Jesus in white theology lies in his purity. The premium on purity forces the Christian mind into an egoistic spiritual experience, one which is most concerned with an individualized religious experiences that is completely focused on the self— on its purity and perfection. A concern for purity means that the individual must be more focused distancing themselves from sin rather than seeing sin as a locus for liberation. Ultimately this emphasis will translate into the development of opposing dichotomous categories of pure versus impure, clean versus unclean, saved versus damned.

It is incredibly easy to utilize that categorical structure to the benefit of white supremacy. Over time and through an evolutionary series of calculated choices, purity has come to be

symbolized by whiteness. This symbolism has been affirmed by the relationship of whiteness to divinely-ordained American exceptionalism. Pure versus impure readily becomes white versus black in the American system. With purity as premium, whiteness now implies a certain closeness to the divine, while blackness has been made time after time the symbol of sin—of moral and intellectual inferiority. Purity represented by whiteness can easily be utilized wholesale against the black body, which is soon assumed to be unclean, coarse, and immoral by default.

This is perhaps best understood in the ways that the white body reacts to the black body. To the white supremacist society, which already relies so much on fear, people of color become dangerous beings bearing the threat of physical harm and sexual impurity. Black men are not men, but rapists and miscengenators who could defile the body (and thus also the purity) of a white woman in a way that would jeopardize her salvation. Black women are not women, but overtly sexualized solicitors. Black children are not children, but proto-criminals: unruly, uneducable, defiant, prone to fighting, untrustworthy. This is everyday reproduced in our media and in our casual conversation, just as it has been since the early days of lynching, when an accusation of even the remotest impropriety with a white woman (even so slight as bumping in to her on a crowded train platform) could send a black man to his death.<sup>53</sup> These stereotypes rely on the default goodness and moral purity of whiteness to establish the default evilness and uncleanness of blackness, and they assist in the dehumanizing effects of whiteness on the black body by providing a justification for white violence against black bodies.

This dehumanization by whites might range in manner from a basic white fear of the black body to active indignities and condescension to various kinds of theft of black agency to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 1-5.

white-justified murder, arguably the most complete theft of personal volition and one that sends a clear message. Kelly Brown Douglas speaks to this in her analysis of the February 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen-year-old black child who was killed one night by a neighborhood watchman in Florida after the watchman perceived Trayvon to be a threat to his safety. “There is virtually a visceral reaction to the black male presence—from locking car doors to clutching one’s purse on an elevator... After hearing what happened to Trayvon as he was walking home from a store wearing a hoodie and carrying Skittles and ice tea, I was once again reminded of what a dangerous world this is for our sons. And I thought about Trayvon’s mother. She sent her son on a trip to visit family, only to have him fall victim to the unfounded fears and stereotypes grafted onto black male bodies.”<sup>54</sup>

The real power and significance of Jesus however, lies in the critique of oppressive empirical power that his life and death illustrates. The essence of Jesus’ life and death centers on the themes of liberation and inverted social order flowing throughout the Gospels. When Jesus is proclaimed as “Lord,” this is contextually powerful because it was a political subversion that contained a theological belief. It undermined the authority of Caesar, the Roman emperor, who was also called “Lord.” The Old and New Testaments alike are very much focused on justice and the righting of wrongs, and the New Testament in particular turns a careful eye to social injustices perpetrated against social groups by empirical power. It also contains a theme of stripping bare the false claims of political regimes that claim to be operating as the ultimate source of justice and peace, as Rome under Caesar Augustus was, because political powers will always be subject to their own interest, which lies adjacent to the people that sustain and benefit

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<sup>54</sup> Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). xi.

from their supremacy. Justice and liberation for an oppressed out-group of individuals, those not sustaining or benefiting from the power dynamic, becomes the focus of the Gospels. This is what Cone is talking about when he says that liberation is the very essence of divine activity.

With liberation at the heart of it, the Gospel message returns to that of the very early days of the Church before Constantine, when Christianity was politically and culturally decentralized and unincorporated in hegemonic structures. In matters of purity, Jesus is not so concerned with the personal purity of his followers. He is chiefly concerned about the ethical purity of their motivations and actions. Jesus demands that his followers be devoted to him and to living out his message of self-sacrificial liberation and justice, rather than permitting themselves to be motivated by their own egoistic and individual concerns.

Cone applies this imperative of liberation to the American context of white supremacy and racial injustice. He insists throughout his work that if the Church is truly to live up to its great promise, then American Christians must understand that black liberation is Christ's

“central message to twentieth-century [and twenty-first century] America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not.”<sup>55</sup>

Black Power for Cone was defined as “complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary...Black power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as being without dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

For the Christian faith to stay rooted in the teachings of Jesus, it cannot continue to be cozy with social and political power structures. It must instead “make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become *prophetic*, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society.”<sup>57</sup> For modern Christianity to be the faith of Jesus, rather than a coopted power tool of a contemporary Caesar, American Christians must give up the false faith of white superiority, decouple their religious traditions and structures from those of power and privilege, and fight those very systems with which they were once aligned.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 2.

## THE DIVINITY OF WHITENESS

Cone writes that whiteness makes the black body a non-being, an entity relegated to the sub-human realm of moral consideration.<sup>58</sup> The mythology of American exceptionalism supports this and reifies it. By positioning the white body as exceptional, aligned with God, and superior to the person of color, whiteness makes itself sacred. That Jesus has come to be imagined as a white man, sometimes even with blue eyes or blond hair, speaks to the pervasiveness of white theology and bears the promise of “a white past, a white present, and a future of white glory.”<sup>59</sup> This is the point at which whiteness becomes the object of divine preference. Through the installation of mythological hierarchy, phenotypical whiteness became holy whiteness, and holy whiteness became an indication of divine preference and predestination. Challenges to the supremacy of whiteness become in many ways challenges to what white people seem to have been treating as a ticket to God’s inner circle, an assurance of their standing as individuals before the infinitude. Placing the black body beneath theirs in the divine hierarchy provides a modicum of subconscious comfort to white people that additionally makes convincing people to give up their racist beliefs a challenging task.

White supremacy necessarily alienates the black body from its humanness through systemic oppression, indignity, and denial of agency. Lynching, segregation, and the evolutions of slavery (namely, Jim Crow and mass incarceration) have been utilized by white communities to violently reinforce the inferiority and powerlessness of people of color.<sup>60</sup> This alienation and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 116-134.

<sup>59</sup> Blum, Edward J. and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).16.

<sup>60</sup> Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011) 7.

denial has been relatively well explored through the lens of black liberation theology, but there is an important inverse to consider here that helps to explain why white people have clung to whiteness even after the moral bankruptcy of racial hierarchy has been made plainly clear. If whiteness alienates the black body from its humanness, what is whiteness doing to the white body?

By its exclusion of people of color from humanness, white supremacy privileges the white body by promoting the stance that whiteness predisposes people to being morally and rationally better than nonwhites, and that whiteness *is* humanness, or that the white body is in fact the *most* human body or the *only* human body. The “average” or “default” American is thus conceptualized even in modernity as a white middle-class to upper-middle-class man, who bears all the original indicators of citizenship from the post-Revolutionary War era. Remember, it is not insignificant that this image has also become the default image of Jesus as well. These beliefs, conscious or not, have developed with the American project as social and legal attitudes surrounding citizenship and belongingness have evolved. They also seems to coincide with a surface understanding of racism that understands racial oppression as motivated by economic forces or the basic human tendency towards prejudice.

I do not believe that this is a thorough enough interpretation of what white supremacy does to the white body and white conscious though. It is not enough to say that white supremacy makes the white body the default manifestation of humanness, though I think that this is likely the deepest level of awareness of how whiteness is operating on them that most white people could identify. The apparatus of whiteness comes to carry profound significance because it implies that white people are direct affiliated with God, and so whiteness ceases to be a phenotypical marker and is transformed into holy whiteness, an indicator of closeness to God

and association with Christ. Whiteness placed white bodies as lords over black bodies, capable of giving and taking autonomy and drawing the lines around what constituted humanity. In doing so, white supremacy gave the white body tasks that belong to God and affirmed its own ownership of rationality and moral decision making by making the black body one which was morally degenerate and incapable of higher thinking.

So in truth it is not only people of color who are alienated from their humanness by the apparatus of whiteness. American white supremacy by necessity alienates all people within its structure from their humanness by delineating some as subhuman and others as superhuman. When whiteness places some people on a superhuman level, it actually places white people in a God-like state, a state which manifests itself in a belief that white people are specifically chosen by God and destined for greatness. White supremacy creates a social reality in which the humanity of one group is denied by a ruling class that has fashioned itself into a god-like being with powers that do not and should not belong within human practice. Simultaneously, it affirms that the white body is chosen and linked to a divine destiny, thus placing upon the white body a theological and psychological imperative for racial hierarchy that makes shaking off the hold of white supremacy incredibly difficult. Who would want to give up something that seems by all accounts to indicate God's preference for you? Who would want to give up an assurance of divine destiny, of heaven, of something beyond our own mortality?

Thus we must recognize that just as the apparatus of whiteness infiltrates every body within the system, white supremacy also holds *everyone* in a state of alienation as a captive to its great untruth. All bodies trapped within the racist mechanism live in a state of estrangement, though this state undeniably manifests differently on different bodies. All bodies require liberation, and must participate in their own liberation and the greater liberation of the whole.



The very mechanism which whites used for centuries to enslave their fellow human beings has in fact enslaved them in a system that separates the white supremacist from the realization of their own moral self and the self-transcendence innate to that realization, which establishes the basic paradigmatic parameters for living a life in unification with what some might call the will of God and what others might call our most loving and authentically human self. For white people to give up the cruel eschatological comfort of white supremacy, something must replace it.

Niebuhr says that the root of imperialism lies in our self-conscious anxiety, that all insecurity contains the root of colonialism,<sup>61</sup> and from this we can understand a little more of the deep uncertainty and distress that built our nation and sustains the horrifically unjust paradigms that we accept as the normative status quo. The profundity of the major tenets of the Christian faith lies in that they provide a freedom from our mortal fears by granting us an assurance of the overwhelming meaningfulness of a life lived for the will of God, as we abide together in an immortal Eucharistic connectedness that proclaims loudly and boldly that suffering, struggle, and death do not have the last word. What is at stake for the white supremacist that persists with their holy whiteness is their very *humanness*, and thus their very *salvation*.

Whiteness imposes an antichristic will upon the white body that will perpetuate itself in perpetuity unless it is consciously rejected, again and again, even as it works through other white bodies to reassert itself. Obeying the rule of God becomes impossible while a human body persists in being a white body. White supremacy forces a human body and human mind to make a false idol out of whiteness, one which sanctifies itself by donning the symbolism and rhetoric of Jesus but never making good on Jesus' promise and power. The god that we worship when we

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<sup>61</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). 42.

allow racial injustice to persist within ourselves and our communities cannot be the god of the Biblical tradition. God is consistent in God's choice to show up, support, love, chose, and *make chosen* the oppressed. In the glorification of whiteness and the reification of whiteness as the locus of the moral and divine, we are in fact worshipping an antichrist fashioned off our own image, one that we lean on for the psychological support it offers. And in claiming to be Christians while living in a wholly unchristian way, adherents to white supremacy take the Lord's name in vain in perhaps the most sacrilegious of ways.

Our nation, which holds on to an idea of itself as divinely chosen and selected out for global and historical greatness and is so despicably comforted by that idea, is in actuality a Christian nation only in the sense that we were told in the scripture that the antichrist will come claiming to be that which it cannot be. This great evil that lives within, around, and above us beguiles our senses and demands that we worship the fear that it creates to sustain itself instead of the God that seeks to overrule that fear. It wreaks massive injustice upon the human family through *human hands* that desperately want an easier way out of the hard work of living. If people can be God's hands and feet on earth, then surely we can become the hands and feet of evil our own fear creates.

## CONCLUSION

What I must reconcile with now is a broader understanding of what it means for the United States to be “a Christian nation.” An endeavor to explore white supremacy as theological framework has rendered my faith in American Christianity unmaintainable. The United States, truly, seems only to be a Christian nation insofar as Christianity could be made useful to the oppressive powers of the ruling class. American Christianity is morally and mythological bankrupt; it bears little resemblance to the teachings of Jesus. Since our earliest foundations, white supremacy has been in a close symbiotic relationship with our structures of government and American Christianity, so much so that detangling one from the other is in a way impossible. So much further research is needed in order to unravel the connections between church and state and whiteness, but we are nevertheless faced with a pressing question: Where does Christianity in America go from here? I am thoroughly uncertain as to whether or not Christianity could ever be salvaged from within the American context. Can we ever successfully decouple Christianity from power and render it useless as a tool of oppression? Or is the temptation and reassurance of white theology too powerful to shake out of the American identity?

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